

Train Them to Summarise

By Ali S. M. Al-Issa

Producing a written summary is claimed to be a difficult mission to accomplish for many EFL learners. Arab learners of English generally complain that writing is the most difficult skill to perform. For the Arab learners, producing a clear and a coherent text with few or no mistakes is difficult. Mistakes include word order, choice of vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and choice of style. This difficulty is due to the considerable difference in the structure between English and the learner's primary language.

Also, writing in an economical and purposeful manner fundamentally requires a special overall linguistic competence and efficiency level, which of course varies from one language user to another.

1. Let me attempt to explain six successful techniques for summary writing that I implemented with my students in a pre-service EFL teacher training college. Please bear in mind that the proficiency levels of the students range between intermediate and upper-intermediate, with the majority falling in the latter category. List five (or more) words on the board and ask the students to individually produce a narrative or a descriptive piece of writing depending on the type of words provided. Insist that they should *not* exceed five sentences, that is, using one of the words in each sentence. To make the exercise more focused and competitive, you can time it. The reason I said "competitive" lies in the fact that this activity can be arranged in the form of a game.
2. Prepare and photocopy different reading texts. Ask the students to silently read a text and underline the key words in the text. This activity helps the students focus their attention on the most important lexical items. Following the activity the teacher and students can clarify and justify the choices of certain words or phrases in a class discussion.
3. Prepare a long reading text with some questions related to the main points of the text. Ask the students to silently read the text and try to find the answers to the questions. Insist on *full* answers. Once the students finish answering all the questions, they will see a summary that was built up in front of them.
4. Ask the class to read a text. Following the silent reading, conduct an open discussion about the main points or events found. Write all the proposed ideas and points on the board. Ask the class to expand the ideas on the board in order to form a summary. During the expansion stage it is recommended to ask the students to close their books to avoid any copying attempts.
5. Prepare a text and a summary of the text with gaps in it for a cloze exercise. The cloze activity will help the student: (a) to identify the key words and place them in the appropriate blanks; and (b) to see a model summary after all the blanks are filled in.
6. Give a talk/lecture on a certain topic, preferably of a direct use and interest to the students, and ask them to take notes. Later, ask them to read out their notes and put what is relevant on the board. The notes on the board can then be expanded to form a summary about the talk/lecture. A word limit should be an integral condition of the summary

exercise. This type of activity trains the learners to follow formal talks and contributes to sharpening their note-taking skill. Note-taking, as is well known, is an integrated activity that leads to the proficiency of the important skill, summarizing.

It is certainly worth mentioning that all these activities and techniques were preceded by exposing the students to different types of summaries from various types of materials. Examples include tables, grids, and charts.

To conclude, summarizing is a highly challenging activity for the students because it compels them to think in an economical way and to produce alternative language while maintaining the same ideas.

Ali S.M. Al-Issa is an EFL/ESP Lecturer at the College of Sharia'a and Law, Muscat, Oman.